



Baroque Transformations and Altered States in the Music of Franz Liszt

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ABOVE Jean-Jacques Feuchère, *Dante Meditating on the "Divine Comedy"*, 1843, pen and brown ink with brown wash and watercolor over graphite, heightened with white gouache, National Gallery of Art, Gift of the Christian Humann Foundation

COVER Giulio Cesare Procaccini, *The Ecstasy of the Magdalen*, 1616 / 1620, oil on canvas, National Gallery of Art, Patrons' Permanent Fund

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TRASUMANAR SIGNIFICAR PER VERBA NON SI PORIA
(TO GO BEYOND THE HUMAN IS NOT POSSIBLE IN WORDS)

Dante, Paradiso, I, 70-1

MUSIC EMBODIES FEELING WITHOUT FORCING IT TO CONTENT
AND COMBINE WITH THOUGHT...

Franz Liszt

For the nineteenth-century Romantic, feeling was everything. The desire to explore and to understand the subjective experience was paramount to the painter, poet, composer, and novelist. These subjective states took many forms: dreams, ecstasy, inspiration, but also darker moods such as delirium, melancholy, grief, and a penchant for the morbid and the grotesque. The greatest triumph for the Romantic artist was to awaken emotions in the viewer, reader, or listener. The concepts of transformation and transfiguration reside at the heart of such thinking, what today might be called “altered states.” Franz Liszt (1811–1886) was a composer committed to feeling. His inspirations included Beethoven, Byron, Dante, Goethe, and Shakespeare. He shared this attitude with his contemporaries Chopin, Schumann, and, most especially, Hector Berlioz. As a prominent figure in the progressive New German School in Weimar, Liszt also recognized this trait in the music of Richard Wagner (1813–1883).

Liszt aspired to convey in music what he felt emanated from the art and architecture of the great masters. In a letter from Italy to Berlioz dated October 2, 1839, he writes:

Day by day my feelings and thoughts gave me a better insight into the hidden relationship that unites all works of genius. Raphael and Michelangelo increased my understanding of Mozart and

Beethoven; Giovanni Pisano, Fra Beato, and Il Francia explained Allegri, Marcello, and Palestrina to me. Titian and Rossini appeared to me like twin stars shining with the same light. The Colosseum and the Campo Santo are not as foreign as one thinks to the Eroica Symphony and the Requiem. Dante has found his pictorial expression in Orcagna and Michelangelo, and someday perhaps he will find his musical expression in the Beethoven of the future.

In Liszt's *Years of Pilgrimage (Années de pèlerinage)*, a set of three suites for solo piano that he worked on intermittently between 1858 and 1883, sections are devoted to musical evocations of works by Raphael and Michelangelo. Liszt's taste in visual art extended to most of the great names in the Louvre. He remarked that his ambition was to give a piano recital in the Salon Carré of the Louvre surrounded by the canvases of Correggio, Giorgione, Leonardo, Raphael, Rembrandt, Tintoretto, Titian, and Veronese.

Liszt's predilections toward the flamboyant and the dramatic led him logically to baroque art as a source of inspiration. Seeking to convey "altered states" of emotion meant embracing the mystical and the visionary as well as the sublime and the beautiful. Indeed, the sublime often resided within the confines of these more visceral and nonclassical modes of expression. In this regard, Liszt shares much in common with Berlioz.

Emerging out of the composer's own suffering after a failed relationship, Berlioz's *Symphonie fantastique* (1830) broke this ground for Romantic composers in both its formal and thematic languages. Its full title describes "An Episode in the Life of an Artist." Berlioz's notes for the symphony's program refer to "morbid disposition," "powerful imagination," "sickness of the soul," "jealous fury," and "volcanic love," all brought about in the young artist who "poisons himself with opium in an attack of despairing passion." To convey

such strange and hallucinatory effects, Berlioz pushes the traditional limits of the orchestra into new realms of color, sound, and programmatic structure.

Liszt, who attended the premiere of the *Symphonie fantastique*, also mingles the grotesque with the voluptuous, the sacred with the profane, the divine and the diabolical. In 1877 he writes, "Music is at once the divine and satanic art that more than all other arts leads us into temptation." Liszt and Berlioz capture the essence of Romantic delirium—seeking sensations and expressing their transformative power through music. Berlioz and Liszt introduce, reconfigure, and restate leitmotifs to achieve thematic transformations. This practice finds its parallels in the ecstatic themes and formal characteristics of baroque art. In the same way that baroque painting and sculpture represent a more dynamic and expressive alternative to earlier classical models, so too does the idea of thematic transformation in music expand the possibilities of the classical sonata form in favor of a more painterly and dramatic language.

The aesthetic theories of *correspondances* and synesthesia play a major role in any discussion of the relationship between music and painting in the nineteenth century. The belief in the interrelatedness of the arts captured the imaginations of most artists of the time. Music that evoked colors and paintings that aspired to the conditions of music were the goals. From Eugène Delacroix and Carl Maria von Weber to Gauguin and Debussy, color and sound comingled to provide the highest gratification of the senses, even to evoke scents and perfumes. This was nowhere more evident than in the writings of the French poet, essayist, and art critic Charles Baudelaire (1821–1867), whose influence in this regard was far-reaching.

Liszt was himself a synesthete. As a conductor, he employed an expressive array of facial gestures and body movements (familiar today in modern conducting, but new with Berlioz). In speaking to

the orchestra, however, Liszt used painterly analogies, referring to tones as colors, and asking members of the orchestra to play a bit “bluer,” or to make a note more “violet.”

Liszt believed in the cross-fertilization of the arts. He numbered among his friends such luminaries as the painters Delacroix and Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres, the writers George Sand and Victor Hugo, and the poets Heinrich Heine and Alphonse de Lamartine. His tone poems, symphonic poems, and program music attest to this on the simplest level. Liszt was not trying to *represent* a poem or a painting however. On this, he is clear when he writes in 1837:

It is obvious that things which can appear only objectively to the perception can in no way furnish connecting points to music; the poorest of apprentice landscape painters could give a few chalk strokes a much more faithful picture than a musician operating with all the resources of the best orchestra. But if these same things are subjectivated to dreaming, to contemplation, to emotional uplift, have they not a kinship with music, and should not music be able to translate them into its mysterious language?

Liszt's romantic image as a fiery virtuoso and demonic personality overshadows the religious aspects of his life and art. As a young man, he expressed an interest in becoming a priest. His father had briefly been a Franciscan monk and his mother was devout and inclined to mysticism. Many of the themes in his music deal with aspiration and transfiguration. His love of Dante was, in part, a reflection of such concerns. As a youth, he read Christian literature including *The Lives of the Saints* and Thomas à Kempis' *The Imitation of Christ*. He describes his heart as “entirely filled with the mystical feelings of love and religion.”

Sacred music comprises an important part of Liszt's oeuvre. He is a musical mystic. He writes, “Is not music the mysterious language of a faraway spirit world whose wondrous accents, echoing within us, awaken us to a higher, more intensive life?”

Among Liszt's own favorite piano pieces was the *Bénédiction de Dieu dans la solitude* written in 1847, the year he retired from public performing to begin a more reclusive life in Weimar. Lamartine's poem of the same name inspired the composition. Its themes of religious solitude, contemplation, ecstasy, and the role meditation plays in elevating one's soul to the divine were close to Liszt's heart. Such beliefs echo the Discalced Carmelite teachings of both Saint Teresa of Ávila and Saint John of the Cross, frequently portrayed in baroque art.

In October 1861, Liszt moved to Rome. On July 31, 1865, he was ordained an abbé (a semi-lay position)—the Catholic (and specifically Franciscan) traditions of his childhood had reasserted themselves. Aside from its religious significance, however, this new status reinforced Liszt's beliefs in the divinity of art and the role of the artist as priest and “‘the Bearer of the Beautiful,’ an intermediary between God and man.”

Alan Walker has written eloquently about the Franciscan tradition in Liszt's family and the composer's personal devotion to Saints Francis of Assisi and Francis of Paola (Calabria). While in Rome, Liszt completed his *Franciscan Legends* for piano: *Saint Francis Preaching to the Birds* and *Saint Francis of Paola Walking on the Waters* (1863). Liszt referred to Saint Francis of Assisi as “the glorious poor servant of Christ.” He considered both men his patron saints. In *Saint Francis Preaching to the Birds*, Liszt found inspiration in the anonymous fourteenth-century text, *The Little Flowers of Saint Francis of Assisi*:

He lifted up his eyes and saw the trees which stood by the wayside filled with a countless multitude of birds; at which he marveled, and said to his companions: 'Wait a little for me in the road, and I will go and preach to my little brothers the birds.' And he went into the field, and began to preach to the birds that were on the ground; and forthwith those which were in the trees came around him, and not one moved during the whole sermon; nor would they fly away until the Saint had given them his blessing.

Contrary to Liszt's sentiment quoted earlier, in these two works he *does* set out to imitate various effects of nature: the chirping and tweeting of birds and a storm at sea.

Contradiction and complexity lie at the heart of Franz Liszt's life and art. The quintessential Romantic, he was also a man of deep religious and mystical beliefs. Reconciling the passion of Byron with the piety of Saint Francis, he reveled in his celebrity status but also required long periods of solitude and monastic contemplation. Virtuoso, composer, conductor, public icon, and religious cleric, he was nourished by fame yet recognized the wisdom in Nicolas Chamfort's belief that "Celebrity is the punishment of talent and the chastisement of merit."

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